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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 001096

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TAGS: [PROP](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [CH](#)  
SUBJECT: FOREIGN MEDIA PRESSURED TO COMPLY WITH CODE OF  
CONDUCT FOR CHINESE STAFF

Classified By: Political Internal Unit Chief  
Dan Kritenbrink. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

#### Summary

11. (C) The Chinese Government issued a new "code of conduct" for PRC staff working at foreign news bureaus on February 13, and although the code largely repeats existing prohibitions on independent news gathering by Chinese assistants, authorities are now enforcing these rules with increased vigor. The Beijing Service Bureau for Diplomatic Missions, an arm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that manages hiring of PRC staff by foreign news organizations, recently forced all assistants to attend a briefing and sign a form promising to abide by the code, which also requires them to portray a "positive" image of China to their employers. While several assistants with whom we spoke said they would ignore the rules and continue to conduct de facto independent reporting, an American journalist told us some of her local assistants are now reticent to do reporting work. At least one U.S. news organization has already been called to task for violating the code and, in response, has decided to stop sending local staff to cover news events alone while also adding a foreign journalist's byline to any piece penned by a Chinese employee. End Summary.

#### "Code of Conduct" Issued for News Assistants

12. (SBU) On February 13, the Beijing Service Bureau for Diplomatic Missions (DSB), an organization under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that manages employment of Chinese nationals by foreign embassies and news bureaus, issued a "code of conduct" for local assistants working at foreign media organizations. On February 13 and 14, according to several contacts, the DSB called two meetings, each session including approximately 200 news assistants, to explain the code. Point four of the code states that, "Chinese employees should only do assistant work.... They must not interview or report independently." Point six requires PRC staff to "actively provide their organizations and foreign reporters with source materials that promote Chinese history and culture and a positive image of China." The code warns PRC staff against "spreading rumors" or reading or duplicating "reactionary" books or videos. Assistants who violate the rules by conducting their own reporting risk termination of their employment contracts. (Note: When a foreign news bureau hires a PRC national, the Chinese citizen must then register with the DSB, technically becoming a DSB employee. Foreign media are not allowed to employ local staff outside the DSB

system, though some still do so on a "temporary" basis. Staff not registered with the DSB, however, have difficulty obtaining credentials for major events such as the National People's Congress.)

¶3. (U) In a March 4 statement, the Foreign Correspondents Club of China (FCCC) said it was "appalled" by the new restrictions on news assistants and called on authorities to scrap the code of conduct. As a result of the new code, the FCCC said, organizers of the March 3-12 session of the National People's Congress, in contrast to past practice, refused to approve interview requests from properly accredited assistants. Human Rights Watch similarly denounced the code of conduct in a March 18 press release.

#### Many Assistants Unconcerned

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¶4. (C) News assistants interviewed by EmbOff generally brushed off the new "code of conduct." Du Juan (strictly protect), an assistant at the Financial Times, told EmbOff March 30 that the code was "no big deal" and most assistants, including herself, would continue to conduct de facto independent reporting. Du, who attended the February 13 DSB briefing, said at the end of the meeting all assistants were forced to sign a statement, to be appended to their DSB employment contracts, stating that they promised to abide by the new code. Du said she initially refused but

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relented after being told she would not be allowed to leave the room until she signed. Echoing Du's comments, three PRC staff members of the New York Times (protect) told EmbOff March 26 that the rules would not impact their work. An American reporter for Public Radio International (protect), however, told EmbOff March 26 that "some assistants felt intimidated" following release of the code and some, particularly those with fewer years on the job, were reticent to do certain kinds of reporting work. More seasoned assistants, however, were more likely to ignore the new code, she said. Jon Watts (protect), President of the FCCC and a correspondent for the Guardian, said on March 27 that while the new code merely repeated existing regulations, what was different this time was the alacrity with which authorities were suddenly enforcing the rules. Still, Watts expressed hope that conditions for assistants would "return to normal" after a few months.

#### Bloomberg Warned

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¶5. (C) Though many assistants with whom we spoke seemed unconcerned by the code of conduct, the MFA has called at least one news organization to task for violating prohibitions on reporting by local staff. Tang Rui, director of the Europe, North America and Oceania Division of the MFA's Information Department, reportedly called in Bloomberg's Beijing Bureau Chief Eugene Tang (protect) April 8 to warn the news service to stop employing PRC nationals as journalists. According to an internal Bloomberg memo obtained by EmbOff, Tang Rui complained that Bloomberg had sent PRC staff to cover the March session of the National People's Congress without being accompanied by Bloomberg's foreign journalists. Solo attendance at news events by local assistants was against the rules, Tang Rui reportedly said. The MFA official also noted that Bloomberg had again broken

regulations by applying for "journalist" credentials for local staff to cover the April 17-19 Bo'ao Forum in Hainan Province.

16. (C) According to Bloomberg's account of the meeting, Tang Rui also criticized statements by the Foreign Correspondent's Club of China (FCCC) and Human Rights Watch opposing the new code of conduct for news assistants. (Note: Eugene Tang is Secretary of the FCCC.) Bloomberg, Tang Rui concluded, was "willfully" breaking China's rules and must cease and desist. When Eugene Tang asked why the MFA was singling out Bloomberg, Tang Rui reportedly said the rules apply to all foreign news bureaus and the MFA was merely "starting with" Bloomberg. In response to the MFA's warning, Bloomberg asked Bo'ao organizers to change the accreditation language for their local staff from "journalist" to "PRC staff." The news service, the memo states, would no longer send local employees to cover events alone and would add a foreign journalist's name to the byline of any story written by PRC employees.

17. (C) As of April 23, Bloomberg appeared to be the only major wire service to receive such a warning. A Reuters journalist (protect) told us April 10 that Reuters management believed that Bloomberg was, in fact, being singled out, and so far Reuters had not been impacted by the code of conduct. Meanwhile, an Associated Press correspondent (protect) said that, given the more restrictive atmosphere for assistants, the AP has started to encourage its local staff not to register with the DSB. Los Angeles Times Bureau Chief Barbara Demick (protect) said March 24 that she and her lone local assistant "ignore" DSB-issued edicts in the hope that "they will go away." So far, Demick reported, the LA Times has not experienced any difficulties with the DSB or MFA.

Comment  
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18. (C) If the warning recently given to Bloomberg is any indication, the Chinese Government is selectively enforcing the "code of conduct" while also putting the impetus largely on foreign news bureaus, rather than on their assistants, to respect

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the rules on local staff. Many contacts believe the tighter restrictions on assistants are related to the sensitive anniversaries taking place in 2009, including the 20th anniversary of the June 4 Tiananmen crackdown. Most foreign journalists with whom we spoke about the code expect enforcement to slacken after a few months. Nonetheless, tough application of these restrictions, however temporary, could seriously hamper the work of foreign journalists, since many rely heavily on their Chinese staff to gather news.  
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